

Crisis in the air

I was flying across the ocean in a big metal box, quietly dozing in business class by courtesy of accumulated frequent flyer points and one of those wine glasses that automatically refill themselves, when my Oslerian aequanimitas was rudely shattered by a voice over the loudspeaker calling for a doctor.

Making my way through countless cabins of fellow travellers sleeping in various distorted positions, I reached a small lounge at the back of the plane bustling with agitated people, some 20 of them packed into that tiny area. On the floor a very heavy set young woman, white as a sheet, pupils dilated, was undergoing cardiac massage. She looked dead, or dying.

With great difficulty, some pushing, and some shoving, I managed to feel her pulse. It was slow and bounding. The cardiac massage was stopped, but an excited woman, clearly in command and towering over her patient, kept giving orders loudly in heavily accented English. She had two assistants, who were holding up the woman's legs so high that I feared they might dislocate her hips. She kept calling for vodka and oxygen and meanwhile was slapping her face and fumbling to open her mouth. "Are you a doctor?" I asked. "I am a dentist," she shouted over the din of voices.

I believe, if I understood rightly, that she wanted to do acupuncture of the tongue. I turned to the young woman on the floor, leaned over her face, and asked how she felt. "I am terribly hot," she said, "could you please take my sweater off."

I motioned to the stewardess to stop fussing with that oxygen mask, and then the young lasses let down the woman's legs. She got up; the crowd dispersed. Later I found out that she had felt ill and might have fainted after taking an anti-sickness nostrum that contained atropine; hence the slow pulse and dilated pupils. Predictably, at New York they held up the plane; paramedics arrived with flashing lights and ringing bells. But they found nothing to do other than fill in forms in duplicate, no doubt.

There has been much in the newspapers lately about defibrillators on board, and how they saved lives. But that night it was perhaps just as well that none was available in our flying box, high up over the great deep, for use by the excitable dentist and her unquestioning assistants.